

Curiosity

The insatiable hunger of a curious mind

Was it the cover of this book that seduced you? The witty title, unexpected and exuding a certain look-twice irony? A smirk amidst shelves stuffed with serious business.

Yes, indeed! It was *curiosity* that drew your attention and compelled you to drag this book from the shelf. The irrepressible desire to acquire new knowledge or learn new skills.

Curiosity, the drive to explore, investigate, innovate, helped our species develop and evolve—pushed us to greatness. Driven by curiosity, we climbed the highest peaks and dived to the deepest depths. We braved world-edges and sea monsters to sail around the world, discovering new continents filled with exotic oddities.

Curiosity prompted us to dress in bulky white suits and strap ourselves into too-thin tin space shuttles stuffed with enough explosives to quite literally blow ourselves to the moon. Curiosity helped us make fire, then electricity. Curiosity gave us bacon on pancakes, all smothered in maple syrup. Perhaps not always in our best interests, but the outcomes were almost always interesting.

More importantly, it's every bit as relevant and influential at work. Curiosity draws our attention and primes us to learn. It has the power to shift mindsets. It can even change the relationships we have with others.

Picture the typical organisation-led leadership program. Someone spots a capability gap in their mid-tier managers. The need for an organisation-wide leadership program is proclaimed, and the usual flurry of activity ensues. Heads nod, learning objectives are identified, speakers are booked, working sessions are arranged, and six months later the program is good to go.

Once backs have been slapped for a job well done, an email is sent to all mid-tier managers requesting their attendance on a particular date. On an inspiration scale from one to William Wallace bellowing ‘FREEDOM!’, the email hits around a one point five. Thirty per cent miss the email altogether. Ten per cent saw it but thought it was spam and didn’t apply to them. Twenty per cent get their backs up because they don’t need a bloody leadership program. The rest are quietly disgruntled at the prospect of taking time out of their busy schedules.

Friends, there’s another way—a better way. And it begins with *curiosity*.

Curiosity draws our attention

Life is full of countless curiosities vying for our interest. Yet the systemised and routine nature of many roles means people are exposed to far fewer sources of curiosity at work. This gives us the ideal opportunity to use curiosity to draw attention to an upcoming program, event or initiative.

Curiosity is a primer for learning

When something intrigues us, we’re compelled to investigate. And when we’re inquisitive enough, it completely consumes us. This makes curiosity ridiculously effective at priming people to learn. By getting folk curious before dropping knowledge, we put them in the ideal state for experimenting, discovering, learning and improving.

Curiosity improves our relationships

Being naturally curious about something is completely different from being *told* to be interested in it. There’s a subtle yet powerful

shift in mindset that happens when we choose to opt in. We're more focused, committed to learning and actively engaged.

This is because when we encourage curiosity, it extends an invitation rather than issuing a command. It pushes us out of a parent-child or sergeant-soldier model, into a better type of relationship. It puts the onus on the individual to learn, promoting accountability and autonomy. It allows adults to be, well, adults—taking responsibility for their own personal development rather than expecting everything to be delivered on the proverbial silver platter.

You won't believe what happens next ...

In the early nineties, a fellow named George Loewenstein identified the psychological phenomenon whereby we're at our most curious when there's a gap between what we know and what we want to know. An almost obsessive need to close this gap triggers an emotional response—much like a cognitive itch that we desperately want to scratch and only relieve by filling in the blanks.

Loewenstein's theory found that we can intentionally provoke curiosity by providing a small amount of information while withholding the rest.

A Caltech study discovered a direct correlation between how much we know and how curious we are to learn more. Researchers took 40 students, an fMRI machine and a quiz...and what happened next isn't the punchline to a nerdy scientist joke. No, they didn't walk into a bar, but they did find out that we're most curious when we know only a little about a subject, up until we have a moderate amount of knowledge, at which point our curiosity steadily decreases. This means that curiosity is often contextual, based on each person's unique knowledge and experience.

Marketing and advertising copywriters have been exploiting the curiosity gap to gain our attention and influence our behaviour for years. Clickbait headlines tease us with just enough information to pique our curiosity, promising a satisfying revelation with just one click.

He was reunited with his cat after several years of separation. What happens next will leave you speechless ...

Despite knowing exactly what those devious marketing devils are doing, damned if I don't pound that link with grudging enthusiasm to find out the ending of this heart-warming tale of man and beast.

Speaking of small furry critters, lean in close, and let your old pals tell you a tale about Kerrie and her rabbits.

Kerrie and the rabbits

Growth is tough, and this rapidly scaling fintech start-up experienced the typical pains. How to keep the close-knit culture they'd enjoyed as a small team as they headed towards becoming a company where it was difficult to remember everyone's name?

Kerrie, Head of People, Leadership and Culture, recognised that to keep their culture strong, they needed to establish a rhythm of communication that would provide ongoing triggers for their vision, values and mission. Bringing rigour to the growing company was necessary, but just as important was staying true to their fun and youthful culture. In short, they wanted to grow up but not grow old.

Kerrie's communication strategy began with a simple idea. She wanted to launch the strategy in a way that captured the attention of the young, savvy and busy crew, and she wanted to shine a spotlight on the company's mission 'to delight'. But how to do it in a way that would break people out of their typical patterns and routines and snare their attention?

The solution? A simple concept that captured curiosity and inspired delight.

Each morning, employees entered the foyer bleary-eyed to discover a new poster featuring a famous bunny from popular culture (the company's logo is a rabbit). From the Easter Bunny to the Playboy Bunny, this was the full gamut of rabbit. The posters were minimal: just a stylised rabbit's head and a word that corresponded to the value it was known for. Like, the Energizer Bunny and stamina, Bugs Bunny and mischief, the Playboy Bunny and ... happy endings.

Every day, employees paused to identify the recently added rabbit, and conversations would begin. ‘Why are they here?’ and ‘What are they for?’ Followed by, ‘Do you remember the first time you watched *Donnie Darko*?’ and, ‘Mmm ... Jake Gyllenhaal.’

To keep these conversations going, for the duration of the campaign Kerrie ran a competition to identify each of the bunnies. This had people Googling famous rabbits, comparing prospective answers with the words on the poster. At the end of the competition, winners were promised a framed rabbit poster of their choice.

On the nineteenth day, the final poster was hung. It showed the company’s logo with the word ‘delight’ underneath. An all-in meeting had been organised for that afternoon, and while the rabbits were still fresh in everyone’s mind, Kerrie introduced the communication strategy. She outlined what it was about and what it meant for everyone. More importantly, she explained how getting more rigorous around communication didn’t mean selling out or becoming dull and corporate; it meant doing it in a way that stayed true to always delivering delight.

We can’t help ourselves

What made Kerrie’s campaign so successful? The investment was small, the implementation easy. Yet each morning most employees would pause, look up from their phones, take the time to examine the posters and even instigate conversations about rabbits.

The campaign captured people’s attention for the same reason all unsolved mysteries fascinate and captivate us. What happened to the *Mary Celeste*? Who was Jack the Ripper, really? What strangeness transpires in the Bermuda Triangle? Is there really a Loch Ness monster? Is there other intelligent life out there in the universe, and if so, is it really intent on probing us inappropriately?

The curiosity gap does more than attract our attention; it compels us to learn.

Evan Polman and researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison conducted several experiments to find out how effective

the curiosity gap was in influencing people's decision making and behaviours. Their study offered 200 participants a choice between a plain cookie and a delicious, chocolate-dipped, sprinkle-burnished biscuit. Which did most choose? The answer is obvious. Or is it?

In a cruel twist, the researchers told half the participants that the plain biscuit was a fortune cookie with a personalised message inside. In the group who weren't given this additional information, a very sensible 80 per cent chose the superior chocolate-dipped cookie. But out of the group who were told the plain biscuit was a fortune cookie, 71 per cent chose the plain biscuit. Curiosity alone caused a majority to make an undeniably inferior cookie choice.

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Other studies confirm that we'll go to more effort simply to satisfy our curiosity. Polman and pals increased the use of stairs in a university building by roughly 10 per cent just by posting trivia questions near the elevator and promising that answers could be found in the stairwell.

Enabling behaviour change is one of the biggest challenges facing any leader. Yet it turns out there's no need for sticks or carrots. Curiosity alone is enough to motivate people to change their own behaviours, even if it means investing more effort or choosing a less desirable outcome.

These findings demonstrate how effective curiosity can be as a catalyst or trigger to gain attention and begin the process of forming new habits. The next challenge is ensuring change is embedded.

Yuvan attempts to lick his elbow

Workplace health and wellness campaigns can easily fall into the eye-rollingly obvious territory of 'eat healthier food' and 'exercise more'. They're even more challenging when you work for one of the largest producers of soft drinks and snack foods. Yuvan, a mid-level manager tasked with the job of rolling out a better health campaign, knew he'd have to bring a fresh approach to a tired topic if he was going to cut through and make a difference.

Yuvan chose to focus on the less frequently discussed areas of health and wellness, like sleeping better, moving better, thinking better and connecting better. The roll-out was comprehensive, including conversation kits for managers, along with digital and environmental triggers. However, it was the content that caught people's attention.

Rather than taking the typical approach, Yuvan led with curiosity. For 'Connect Better', the headline of the poster read: 'DID YOU KNOW THAT IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO LICK YOUR OWN ELBOW?' paired with a stylised image of someone attempting the feat.

Inevitably people tried. You can't throw down a gauntlet like that and not have people thrusting tongue vainly at funny bone (admit it, you're resisting the urge to give it a go right now!). And inevitably the resulting contortions attracted the attention of passers-by, who stopped to quiz the aspiring elbow-lickers as to what on earth they were doing.

Much hilarity ensued, with energetic efforts to help one another reach the unreachable, and conversations around who knew about this elbow caper. The follow-up material identified how all these things—laughter, touch and conversations—increase trust and foster better relationships. The result? Not only did everyone *understand* the concept of connecting better, but they were actually *engaged* in connecting better.

Each focus area used a similar approach: a 'Did you know...' fact that made people curious to find out more. The initiative was so successful that although it started in Australia, it soon spread around the world.

We were born curious

Perhaps the best news is that curiosity isn't something we need to learn. We're curious from the moment we're pushed out into this world, and it plays a major role in our development from infancy through childhood.

It makes sense that to survive and evolve our species would be wired to be curious. Are those red berries edible? Masticate and

hope for the best. If we live to tell the tale, it's good news for us, but even better news for the tribe, who now have a whole new food source.

Behind our curious behaviour is an active mind and pleasurable chemicals. fMRI scans of an inquisitive brain reveal a notable increase in activity in three areas: the left caudate, the prefrontal cortex and the parahippocampal gyrus.

The caudate is of particular interest (perhaps because no-one can pronounce or remember the name of the gyrating hippopotamus region). Linked to learning, the caudate's a real giver, a pleasure centre responsible for all sorts of wonderful feelings when stimulated with new information. Our desire for knowledge begins as a dopamine craving in the same primal pathway that responds to sex, drugs, and rock and roll. 🙌

Yes, we're all junkies, of sorts. Brain engorged with new knowledge, you're probably high right now. Do you feel it? Dopamine, serotonin and opioids—all rushing through your brain, rewarding you for your curiosity.

Don't fight it. Just relax...

Mya and the Blarney Stone (Part I)

Every year, Mya's team come together from around the world for their annual summit. It's a chance to meet other team members who have previously existed only as disembodied voices in phone calls, or sporadic email conversations.

This year, Mya, Director of Digitalisation and Governance, decided the summit would be different. It wasn't that previous years had been mediocre, but the theme for the upcoming year, *Better Bolder Clearer Stronger*, meant lifting the experience to match her lofty ideal.

Mya wanted people to enter the event with a different mindset. But instead of just telling people the event would be different from previous years, she decided to *demonstrate* that it would be better, bolder, clearer and, yes, stronger too.

Her first point of contact with attendees was exactly the opposite of the explicit, detail-heavy email invitation often used for work functions. Instead, over a five-week period leading up to the summit, she delivered a weekly hand-drawn video sharing facts about the venue (Cork, Ireland), tied loosely to one of the four themes.

In the first video, attendees learned about Cork's traditions of standing strong in the face of adversity dating all the way back to the Viking raids of the ninth century (Better Together). The second video shared the story of Sir Walter Raleigh coaxing the first potato from the rich soils around Cork (Bolder Aspirations). The third video revealed the legend of the Blarney Stone, and how kissing it would grant the gift of the gab (Clearer Communication). The fourth video informed attendees that Cork is home to the largest pot still in the world (Stronger Performance). Only in the fifth and final video, five weeks later, were attendees given a more traditional invitation to the event, along with an explanation of the four themes.

The videos were short, no more than 40 seconds each, with simple images hand-drawn onto one page over the duration of the clip. And the response was terrific. Mya received great feedback on the videos, but, more importantly, everyone said how much they were looking forward to experiencing something different.

We remember the peripherals

The summit was an event attendees already looked forward to, but Mya and her team's teaser videos amplified their excitement by focusing on the unfamiliar destination.

Studies have found that curiosity not only primes us to learn about a specific topic, but also helps us remember peripheral and incidental information around the topic.

Neuroscientist Charan Ranganath rounded up 19 people and showed them a list containing over 100 questions. Participants rated each question on how curious they were to know the answer, then

fMRI was used to monitor their brain activity while they reviewed their highest-rated questions. After looking at each question for 14 seconds, they were shown a photo of a completely unrelated person, then given the answer.

Later, participants were tested to see how well they recalled both the answers and faces. In a fascinating revelation, Ranganath found that the more curious people were about a question, the more likely they were to remember not only the answer, but also the face that preceded it. A follow-up test a day later confirmed the results. Curiosity primes learning and memory, but it isn't just confined to the specific content we're studying; it includes any peripheral information we're exposed to at the same time.

Mya's campaign worked perfectly by focusing on the part of the experience that attendees had only a small amount of knowledge about: the destination. This prompted curiosity that bled into interest in the summit itself. And rather than telling people that the event would be different, she allowed attendees to form the impression themselves, based on the format and content of the messaging.

Stone-cold killers of curiosity

So — there must be a catch, right?

Well, yes. Curiosity can captivate us so completely that there's the risk of enjoying the journey more than the destination. And while we definitely want people to thrill to the process of discovery, we also want to ensure their expectations are met so they finish on a high.

When it comes to avoiding a tepid conclusion, we need to consider three stone-cold killers of curiosity.

Unrealistic expectations

If we want people to be satisfied with the results of their curious endeavours, we need to manage their expectations early. Promising

specific outcomes can be risky, as it can set potentially unrealistic beliefs. It's far better to promise (and deliver) an enjoyable discovery experience.

A good time, not a long time

Time is also an important factor in maintaining curiosity. Studies show that when we don't expect to resolve our curiosity in a reasonable time, we're more likely to get frustrated and lose interest.

Questions left hanging too long, or information shared too slowly or sporadically, can throw a big wet blanket over curiosity, which is obviously exactly the opposite of what we want to achieve. In most cases, we can avert potential problems through proper planning. However, in situations where long timeframes are unavoidable, we should consider making progress visible to maintain motivation.

Fear of failure

Of all the threats to curiosity, fear is the quickest killer of motivation. This is the perception (correct or not) that we might not be capable of satisfying our interest.

This is a crucial consideration when designing learning or development programs. We need to ensure learning is achievable, even if it means catering to different ability levels rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. More importantly, we need to ensure people believe they're capable of success.

We also need to be wary of discouraging curious behaviours. As many organisations place increasing importance on innovation, curiosity is a valuable quality to find and foster in people. However, with innovation comes risk and uncertainty.

Punishing failure is a great way to crush future curiosity—and potential brilliance along with it.

The truth is that curiosity doesn't always lead to organisation-changing ideas and industry-changing innovation. It can just as easily lead to a magnificent failure. And there's the rub. Punishing failure is a great way to crush future curiosity—and potential brilliance along with it.



How to speak ... curiosity

Idea #01: Make it incomplete

Make it ...incomplete? Sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? But, as Loewenstein, Kerrie, Yuvan and Mya all realised, we're most curious when we have a small amount of information and the rest is withheld.* Our need to close the curiosity gap—the gap between what we know and what we want to know—drives us crazy.

To make our communication incomplete, we can:

- Tease people with a small amount of information while withholding the rest.
- Drip-feed content in small amounts to keep people hungry for more.
- Provide information as a puzzle or quiz for people to fill in the blanks.
- Consider segmenting communication where significant differences in knowledge or experience exist. The curiosity gap is more effective when we know a small to moderate amount.

* This is a tactic best left for positive things—never bad news. No-one wants to be drip-fed hints about their impending sacking.



Idea #02: Make it intriguing

We're fascinated by mysteries and puzzles. They capture our imagination and inspire us to wonder at the possibilities. In our tale about Kerrie and her rabbits, the appearance of a new poster each day was a mystery that prompted speculation. What were they about? How long would it go on for? When would we find out the purpose?

How can we incorporate more mystery into our communication? We're glad you asked!

To make our communication intriguing, we can:

- Use teaser campaigns in the lead-up to programs, events or initiatives, rather than jumping straight to making explicit announcements.
- Lead with questions rather than statements—they inspire curiosity and open a conversation.
- Use quizzes for learning—they invite a more active approach.
- Allow people the opportunity to sate their curiosity in a reasonable time.



Idea #03: Make it novel

We're curious about anything unfamiliar, shiny or new. The lead-up to Mya's summit used an offbeat approach to pre-event communication. It was unorthodox in every aspect, from the medium to the message to the illustration style.

To bring novelty into our communication, we can:

- Look at what we've done in the past, especially the things we do frequently—then do them differently.
- Bring something entirely new to our communication. This might be a new channel or medium, or an entirely new style.
- Look beyond our own preferences, interests and experience, and consider what others might find unique.
- Find out what's being done in other industries, and adapt those ideas to our contexts.



Idea #04: Make it unpredictable

We're lulled by routine and repetition; anything that falls outside the usual context captures our curiosity. This isn't to say that routine is bad or that we need to take a wrecking ball to *everything*. But if we want attention, we need to shake things up.*

To make our communication unpredictable, we can:

- Build a rhythm of unpredictability and delight. Consistency, consistency, consistency — grenade! Enough consistency to feel comfortable ... then hit them with something new to grab their attention.
- Change things up regularly to avoid complacency. Create structures with the flexibility to evolve. Switch up traditions and regular events to keep them interesting.
- Find peripheral information that's in some way related to the subject, rather than leading with obvious headlines. One or two steps sideways from the primary content is where we find some of the most interesting and attention-grabbing material.

* Another area for caution, friends. Times of organisational unrest aren't the best time for lobbing communication hand grenades, no matter how delightful.